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THE CONFLICT OF MORAL OBLIGATION IN THE TRILOGY OF AESCHYLUS

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It will be generally admitted, I think, that Aeschylus is one of the great religious and philosophic poets of all time. And it will be perhaps hardly less generally conceded that no philosophic problem was for him more interesting or more momentous than that of establishing and defending the concept of a moral government of the world. Even those who accuse him of having subjected all things to the iron rule of Fate cannot reproach him with a blind fatalism. If he saw inexorable Necessity at the heart of the world, he also saw Justice writ large upon its face; and if he believed God and man alike to be pawns in the hands of Destiny, the rule of the game was still to punish the wrong moves of the one by the sure interposition of the other.

The question of this reputed fatalism I do not intend to argue. I must content myself with recording my agreement with those who find in Aeschylus an exponent of the freedom of the will. But it will not be amiss to add at the same time the warning that to him, as to his contemporaries, the problem of freedom had not occurred in the form in which it confronts us. The possibility in any given choice of a metaphysical "indifference" of the will to all antecedent motives was a point which had not been raised. Freedom and responsibility dwelt in the realm of feeling pure and simple, and were regarded as non-existent or existent according as a choice did or did not seem to the agent to be made under outer compulsion.

But if Aeschylus is not a fatalist, he is something far more terrible. He may leave his characters their freedom, but he leads them into situations where its exercise is intolerable. He confronts them again and again with dilemmas where there is a conflict of duties such that while a choice is morally imperative, none is morally possible. Fidelity to one obligation involves disloyalty to another equally solemn. The divine law bids and forbids in the same breath. If honour is to stand, it must be rooted in dishonour. Under such circumstances freedom is far more dreadful than Fate.

It is largely by the use of this device, I think, that Aeschylus arrives at his effect of extraordinary grandeur. Each of the three great tragedians had his way of transmuting the baser elements of the ancient legends into the pure gold (perhaps in the case of Euripides it is silver) of high and noble tragedy. In the very act of discrediting a story or of protesting against a conception of the good which appeared to him unworthy, Euripides would transfuse into them the life-blood of human experience, with all its pulse and glow of passion and emotion and motive. Sophocles accepted all, and transfigured all in a vision "under the aspect of eternity," where things were no longer what they seemed, but one and all asserted eternal Providence. Aeschylus, on the contrary, viewing history, as he did, as the display of a divine Justice to whose law all other laws, physical and moral, were subservient, discredited nothing and transfigured nothing. He found rather in the past, however primitive and barbarous its legends, a cumulative justification of the ways of God to men. But what was dark and low in the ancient myths he raised and illumined for all time, not only by making their tale of suffering an account of the due wages of sin, but also by showing behind sin itself the struggle and agony of conflicting yet divinely imposed obligations, and by displaying

his characters neither as playthings of blind Fate nor as sacrifices to the incomprehensible purposes of the gods, but as victims of their own freedom. Guilt for him is not a sudden and wanton thing. It is the slow inclination of the balance after long wavering. Duty is weighed against duty in the scales, not pure good against unmitigated evil. The deed can justify itself in part, for the moral situation involved in it presents a dilemma, where the victim can only do what is right and morally enjoined from one point of view by doing what is wrong and forbidden from another. Hence the crime about which the tragic situation centres is never wholly villainous. Of the impulses of which it is the result some at least are noble. And the decision which ensues, criminal though it may be, is felt and justified by the agent as having been compelled by a moral obligation. The tragic character of the fault then lies in the perversion of the will, not by a wholly evil motive but by a false estimation of the true weight and worth of the conflicting aspects under which the right presents itself.

It is my object to trace briefly in the *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi* of Aeschylus the evolution of a series of these conflicts of duty in what I believe to be an ascending scale from a lesser to a greater degree of balance, culminating in a complete equilibrium of obligations. I shall then discuss the solution offered by the poet in the *Eumenides* to the moral problem which such a situation presents.

It will be well, by way of preface, first to remind ourselves of a factor in the Trilogy second only in dramatic importance to the balancing of obligations. This is Aeschylus' treatment of the ancient motive of a family Curse, arising in some primal sin and haunting the doomed race from generation to generation, ever turning new crime to the punishment of old, and again ever making its instruments in their turn the objects of its vengeance.

This Curse is conceived not as an internal taint, but as an external and semi-personal agent. It is a *δαίμων γέννας*, a *συλλήπτωρ πάτροθεν*, an *ἀλάστωρ*, a family ghost, descending from father to son, a spirit of vengeance patiently biding its time to repay itself out of the fortunes of the living for the misdeeds of the dead. Its victims, however, are never innocent. The children are not punished for the sins of the fathers. Whatever the idea may have been in earlier and cruder times, as it appears in Aeschylus' mind it is purged, deliberately perhaps, of any implication of beliefs like the Hebrew teaching of the visitation of the sins of the fathers upon the innocent children, or the Christian doctrine of original sin. For Aeschylus, the children contract the ancestral doom not through heredity but of their own free and sinful will. Those among them that are pure in heart escape. But if they incline to evil ways, the Curse enters in through their propensity to sin and infects them. Their wickedness, for which they and they alone are responsible, it then turns to the service of the divine justice. Through their deeds it exacts repayment—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—of the debt of ancient wrong; but the very acts by which justice is done heap up a new debt and become in their turn, because conceived in sin, the occasion of fresh retaliation. Thus perpetuated, the Curse descends from generation to generation.

It is under the menace of such a haunting family Curse that we find the house of Atreus at the beginning of the Trilogy. In olden times Atreus and Thyestes had fled from their father Pelops to Argos, where Atreus married Aerope the daughter of King Eurystheus, and later ruled in his stead. But Thyestes committed adultery with his brother's wife, and was banished from Argos. He returned, however, and sought sanctuary at the altar. Atreus, fearing to put him to death, for vengeance

murdered certain of his children and served them to him at a feast. But when Thyestes discovered the deed, he laid a curse upon Atreus and his children, that they too should perish miserably.

We come now to that portion of the story upon which the Trilogy is based. Agamemnon and Menelaus, the sons of Atreus, married the daughters of Leda, Clytemnestra and Helen. Helen was carried off by Paris, son of Priam, and for her sake the two kings led the hosts of the Achaeans against Troy. But the expedition was held becalmed at Aulis through the will of the goddess Artemis, who was angered against Agamemnon because he had slain a doe sacred to her, and she demanded for her appeasement the sacrifice of his daughter Iphigeneia. And Agamemnon in the end consented to the sacrifice. So Troy was at last besieged, and after ten years' time taken.

Meantime Clytemnestra, left behind in Argos, took Aegisthus the youngest son of Thyestes as her paramour. Because of her passion for him and her wrath at the death of Iphigeneia, she plotted to kill Agamemnon on his return. Meanwhile she sent away their son Orestes to King Strophius of Phocis to be brought up far away. And when Agamemnon returned from Troy, she and Aegisthus murdered him and reigned in Argos.

But Orestes, when he was grown, heard of his father's shameful death, and went to Delphi to inquire of the oracle what he should do. And Apollo bade him avenge his father's death upon his mother. So he went secretly to Argos and slew both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Then the Furies of his mother seized upon him, and maddened him and drove him forth over the whole earth in search of purification from the stain of his deed. At last he came again to Delphi, and was promised there that he should find release from his suffering at Athens. So he went to Athens still hounded by

the Furies of Clytemnestra. Then Apollo and the Furies disputed his guilt before certain citizens of Athens and the goddess Athena as jury. The Athenians were equally divided, but Athena gave her vote for acquittal. Therefore Orestes was released.

But the Furies were angry with the goddess and with Athens, and threatened to wreak their vengeance upon the Athenians and depart from the land. Athena, however, placated them with promises of great honor in the city, and a shrine near her own temple. So they put aside their wrath and were henceforth known and worshipped, not as Erinyes or Furies, but as Eumenides or Gracious Ones. As for Orestes, he went back to Argos, and the Curse on the house of Atreus ceased.

With this story in mind let us now turn back to the first play in the Trilogy, the *Agamemnon*. The shadow of the Curse—a shadow both of past and coming events—falls darkly across its opening pages. In the first chorus the prophecy of the soothsayer Calchas is fraught with sinister meaning. The omens—two eagles rending a hare big with young—predict indeed the final success of the expedition against Troy. But they also recall the accursed feast which Atreus set before Thyestes, and Agamemnon's own slaying of the sacred doe, and the wrath of Artemis. Again, they dimly forewarn against the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, and the murder of Agamemnon at the hands of Clytemnestra and her paramour.

Go forth, he cried, and Priam's town shall fall.
Yet long the time shall be; and flock and herd,
The people's wealth, that roam before the wall,
Shall force hew down, when Fate shall give the word.

But O beware! lest wrath in Heaven abide,
To dim the glowing battle-forges once more,
And mar the mighty curb of Trojan pride,
The steel of vengeance, welded as for war!

For virgin Artemis bears jealous hate
 Against the royal house, the eagle-pair,
 Who rend the unborn brood, insatiate—
 Yea, loathes their banquet on the quivering hare.

(Ah woe and well-a-day! but be the issue fair!)

For well she loves—the goddess kind and mild—
 The tender new-born cubs of lions bold,
 Too weak to range—and well the sucking child
 Of every beast that roams by wood and wold.

So to the Lord of Heaven she prayeth still,
 “Nay, if it must be, be the omen true!
 Yet do the visioned eagles presage ill;
 The end be well, but crossed with evil too!”

Healer Apollo! be her wrath controll’d,
 Nor weave the long delay of thwarting gales,
 To war against the Danaans and withhold
 From the free ocean-waves their eager sails!

She craves, alas! to see a second life
 Shed forth, a curst unhallowed sacrifice,
 ’Twixt wedded souls artificer of strife,
 And hate that knows not fear, and fell device.

At home there tarries like a lurking snake,
 Biding its time, a wrath unreconciled,
 A wily watcher, passionate to slake
 In blood resentment for a murdered child.

Such was the mighty warning, pealed of yore
 Amid good tidings, such the word of fear,
 What time the fateful eagles hovered o’er
 The kings, and Calchas read the omen clear.¹

In this initial situation we find also the first and least evenly balanced of the series of conflicts of obligation. On the one hand, Agamemnon is assured that the gods approve the expedition against Troy and will eventually

¹ Agamemnon, 124 et seq. The quotations are from Morshead’s translation.

crown it with success; on the other, he is reminded of the hereditary Curse hovering vampire-like about his house, and waiting but the invitation of some evil deed to enter in and exact its toll of blood. He acts then both at the behest and in defiance of the prophecy. His decision is right, but it behooves him to see that it be not rash.

All too soon, however, he gives the *δριμύς ἀλάστωρ* of his race the opening which it seeks. The fleet, launched against Troy, is held by adverse winds at Chalcis in Euboea. The soothsayer announces the wrath of Artemis which can only be appeased by the sacrifice of Iphigeneia. Agamemnon must decide between the failure of the whole Trojan enterprise and the life of his daughter. Like his decision, the conflict of duties preceding it assumes at this point a tragic dignity. On the one side are his fidelity to the cause of his brother Menelaus, his duty to the expedition, and his loyalty to his comrades-at-arms; on the other is his duty to his child. The one obligation can only be fulfilled at the expense of the other. A choice must be made. And Agamemnon chooses wrongly.

Of the sinfulness of that choice, Aeschylus leaves us no doubt. It is prompted by a dire necessity indeed, but it springs from a blinded vision and a hardened heart.

Thus on his neck he took
 Fate's hard compelling yoke;
 Then in the counter-gale of will abhorr'd, accursed,
 To recklessness his shifting spirit veered.
 Alas that Frenzy, first of ills and worst,
 With evil craft men's souls to sin hath stirred!
 And so he steeled his heart—ah, well-a-day!
 Aiding a war for one false woman's sake,
 His child to slay,
 And with her spilt blood make
 An offering, to speed the ships upon their way.²

² Agamemnon, 218 et seq.

From this moment Agamemnon's fate is sealed. He has willed the wrong, and the Curse seizes upon him, to make him both the instrument and the object of the law of retaliation. By his deed, the actual sacrifice of his own child, repayment is made for the long-ago murder of the children of Thyestes. But his act is none the less a new sin which will find him out at last. The divine Justice bides its time through all the long years that he moves in splendid security, king of men, captain of the great captains that make war on Troy. Ilium is taken, and the gods grant him a safe and swift return. And then in the hour of final triumph, vengeance comes, sudden and terrible. The acclamations which greet his homecoming die away behind him, as he enters the palace, into that sudden, dreadful moment of silence about which the *Agamemnon* pivots—a moment broken once, and then once again less sharply, by the cry of one wounded unto death.

The murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra is presented as the outcome of a more acute and at the same time more evenly balanced conflict of obligations than that which actuates the sacrifice of Iphigeneia. Agamemnon's cause is minimized. In any event it required no pleading. The Greek audience did not need instruction in the duties owed a husband by his wife. On the other hand, the case for Clytemnestra is urged with all the resources of the pleader's and the dramatist's art. Her adultery with Aegisthus, though it is at once poetic justice for the ancient sin of Thyestes and a sufficient and wholly ignoble motive for her crime, is kept almost entirely below the surface of the action, and allowed to contribute only a dark undercurrent to the sweep of events. Again, her righteous anger at the effrontery of Agamemnon in flaunting his own infidelity before her eyes and in commending his latest mistress to her care, is similarly made only a contributory and not a deter-

mining cause. In a word, Aeschylus rejects both the fear of a guilty and the anger of an outraged wife as motives, appropriate and sufficient as either might have been to the ensuing event. The dominant motive he bases fairly and squarely upon a moral relation and a moral obligation. It is the duty incumbent upon a mother to avenge the murder of her child, which inspires Clytemnestra's action. Indeed, for an instant he permits her to stand before us, austere, impersonal, redeemed from her baseness and vindictiveness. Her will and her personality are in abeyance. She is merged with the avenging angel of the Atreidan race, consecrated to the work of the eternal Justice of the world, of which she has been the divinely appointed instrument, and uplifted by the vision of that Justice finally accomplished by her deed and of the shadow of the Curse at last removed forever from the Atreidan house.

I will quote somewhat at length from the great scene between Clytemnestra and the chorus, in which she defends herself:

CHORUS

Grim is his wrath and heavy on our home,
That fiend of whom thy voice has cried,
Alas, an omened cry of woe unsatisfied,
An all-devouring doom!

Ah woe, ah Zeus! from Zeus all things befall—
Zeus the high cause and finisher of all!
Lord of our mortal state, by him are willed
All things, by him fulfilled!

Yet ah my king, my king no more!
What words to say, what tears to pour
Can tell my love for thee!
The spider-web of treachery
She wove and wound thy life around;
And lo! I see thee lie,
And thro' a coward, impious wound
Pant forth thy life and die!

A death of shame—ah woe on woe!
A treach'rous hand, a cleaving blow!

CLYTEMNESTRA

My guilt thou harpest, o'er and o'er!
I bid thee reckon me no more
As Agamemnon's spouse.
The old Avenger, stern of mood,
For Atreus and his feast of blood,
Hath struck the lord of Atreus' house,
And in semblance of his wife
The king hath slain.
Yea, for the murdered children's life
A chieftain's in requital ta'en.

CHORUS

Thou guiltless of this murder, thou!
Who dares such thought avow?
Yet it may be, wroth for the parent's deed,
The fiend hath holpen thee to slay the son.
Dark Ares, god of death, is pressing on
Thro' streams of blood by kindred shed,
Exacting the accompt for children dead,
For clotted blood, for flesh on which their sire did feed.

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CLYTEMNESTRA

I deem not that the death he died
Had overmuch of shame;
For this was he who did provide
Foul wrong unto his house and name.
His daughter, blossom of my womb,
He gave unto a deadly doom,
Iphigeneia, child of tears.
And as he wrought, even so he fares.
Nor be his vaunt too loud in hell;
For by the sword his sin he wrought,
And by the sword himself is brought
Among the dead to dwell.

CHORUS

Ah, whither shall I fly?
 For all in ruin sinks the kingly hall;
 Nor swift device nor shift of thought have I
 To 'scape its fall.
 A little while the gentler rain-drops fail.
 I stand distraught—a ghastly interval—
 Till on the roof-tree rings the bursting hail
 Of blood and doom. Even now fate whets the steel
 On whetstones new and deadlier than of old—
 The steel that smites, in Justice' hold,
 Another death to deal.
 O Earth! that I had lain at rest
 And lapped for ever in thy breast,
 Ere I had seen my chieftain fall
 Within the laver's silver wall,
 Low-lying on dishonoured bier!
 And who shall give him sepulchre,
 And who the wail of sorrow pour?
 Woman, 'tis thine no more!
 A graceless gift unto his shade
 Such tribute, by his murd'ress paid!
 Strive not thus wrongly to atone
 The impious deed thy hand hath done.

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CLYTEMNESTRA

Peace! for such task is none of thine.
 By me he fell, by me he died,
 And now his burial rites be mine!
 Yet from these halls no mourners' train
 Shall celebrate his obsequies.
 Only by Acheron's rolling tide
 His child shall spring unto his side,
 And in a daughter's loving wise
 Shall clasp and kiss him once again!

CHORUS

Lo! sin by sin and sorrow dogg'd by sorrow,
 And who the end can know?
 The slayer of to-day shall die to-morrow;
 The wage of wrong is woe.

While Time shall be, while Zeus in heaven is lord,
 His law is fixed and stern;
 On him that wrought shall vengeance be outpoured,
 The tides of doom return.
 The children of the curse abide within
 These halls of high estate,
 And none can wrench from off the home of sin
 The clinging grasp of fate.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Now walks thy word aright, to tell
 This ancient truth of oracle;
 But I with vows of sooth will pray
 To him, the power that holdeth sway
 O'er all the race of Pleisthenes.
 Tho' dark the deed and deep the guilt,
 With this last blood my hands have spilt,
 I pray thee let thine anger cease!
 I pray thee pass from us away
 To some new race in other lands,
 There, if thou wilt, to wrong and slay
 The lives of men by kindred hands.

For me 'tis all-sufficient meed,
 Tho' little wealth or power were won,
 So I can say, 'Tis past and done.
 The bloody lust and murderous,
 The inborn frenzy of our house,
 Is ended, by my deed!³

The answer of the chorus is plain. The plea of Clytemnestra is rejected. She is not irresponsible but free, and her decision flows not from the pure springs of duty alone but is tainted by an admixture of baser motives. Her vision of the right has been clouded by fear and anger and lust. She has chosen wrongly. If then she has made of herself the instrument, she has at the same time made of herself a fit object of the Curse. Her deed,

³ Agamemnon, 1468 et seq.

no less than Agamemnon's, involves the law of retaliation and calls for punishment. And again Justice comes suddenly, at the end of so long and so well-established a security that it has almost seemed as if the gods forgot.

In the murder of Clytemnestra by Orestes we reach the climax of the counterpoising of obligations. The balance is now absolute, considered both morally and dramatically. Filial duty as strictly enjoins Orestes to avenge his father as it forbids him to kill his mother. Natural feeling renders both alternatives equally dreadful. He is in an *impasse* where movement forward or to either side is equally impossible. But to render the horror of the situation complete, his retreat is also cut off. The irony of things is such that indecision is equivalent to decision. Choose he must, for to choose not to choose is to leave Agamemnon unavenged.

With emotion, motive, judgment, and obligation all thus brought to an absolute equilibrium, an outside power is required to tip the scales and precipitate the crisis. But this power cannot be sought in any admixture of base motive. No madness of "Ἄρῃ blinds Orestes' vision. His judgment is not perverted. He faces the full terror of his situation with a clear eye and a pure will. His heart is not hardened by sin but steeled by a divine command. It is to a god whom he turns in his extremity, and it is a god who bids him slay his mother.

CLYTEMNESTRA

Stay, child, and fear to strike. O son, this breast
Pillowed thine head full oft, while, drowsed with sleep,
Thy toothless mouth drew mother's milk from me.

ORESTES (*to his companion Pylades*)

Can I my mother spare? Speak, Pylades.

PYLADES

Where then would fall the hest Apollo gave
 At Delphi? where the solemn compact sworn?
 Choose thou the hate of all men, not of gods.

ORESTES

Thou dost prevail; I hold thy counsel good.⁴

This intervention of Apollo cannot but suggest the device of the *deus ex machina*. It is inspired, however, by a higher art than that which, justly or unjustly, is attributed to Euripides. It does not pretend to cut a knot which cannot be untangled, and thus to bring matters to a *dénouement*. It rather emphasizes the problem and prepares the way for further treatment of it.

If in turning at length to the *Eumenides* we have to note the substitution of a divine command for the passion and blindness of a sinful heart as a controlling spring of action, we may also find significant the changed method of the punishment of Orestes. The haunting Curse of the house of Atreus has disappeared, and its place has been taken by the avenging Erinyes of Clytemnestra. The continuity of the action, however, is not broken by the transition. In a sense, Orestes is still the victim of the Curse. Its operation accounts for the situation and the dilemma with which he finds himself confronted, and from which there is no escape. And it uses him as the instrument of its vengeance. But it does not perpetuate itself through his act, and mark him out as its victim. The Erinyes replace it as the agents of his punishment.

This substitution, I think, is deliberate, and is intended, along with the substitution of the command of Apollo for the blindness of sin, to raise the question of how far Orestes' deed is to be considered criminal. To have retained the Curse would have been to condemn Orestes

⁴ Choephori, 896 et seq.

unheard, and to presuppose that he has sinned, for, as we have seen, the Curse can only operate through an agent already criminally disposed. Moreover, the Curse is an expression of the impersonal Justice inherent in the order of the world, whereas the Erinyes are more personal, and more divorced from the concept of any abstract law of just reparation. They are the spirits of vengeance rather than of justice. They hearken simply to the cry of the wronged and slain for blind revenge, when the slayer has been his kin, and take no heed of the motives and circumstances of the act. They see no further than that to slay one's kin is in any case a wrong for which payment must be made, irrespective of the innocence of the agent. From their pursuit and from the wrath of the ghost of the murdered Clytemnestra, Orestes cannot be freed, whatever the merits of his case may be.

So it is that the Erinyes appear not as judges, but as prosecutors pure and simple, urging their cause *à parti pris*. All their weight is thrown on one arm of the scales. And over against them, as a counterpoise, is Apollo, the defendant, equally partisan. God is arrayed against god. The argument is, as it were, transferred to Heaven, and the conflict of duties involved is raised to a superhuman level and becomes a cosmic problem. At this new height, however, the equilibrium continues to be exactly maintained. There is a curious wrangle which leaves, for us at least, the crux of the question untouched. The Erinyes justify their partisanship and their neglect of the cry of Agamemnon for vengeance (a situation demanded by the dramatic necessities of the play) by arguing that a husband is no blood-relation to his wife. In return, Apollo grounds his championship of Orestes on the plea that a son is no blood-relation to his mother. Just how seriously Aeschylus means to urge these arguments it is impossible to determine. To the modern ear they seem specious. But however

that may be, their very speciousness is of considerable dramatic value. It keeps the situation in suspense. Even on the superhuman and cosmic level the deadlock is still complete.

Another aspect of the situation has provoked criticism. The arguments take place before a human tribunal constituted for the occasion—the Areopagus, presided over by the goddess Athena. It is said that to bring the gods as pleaders before a human law-court and to submit the question at issue to its decision, is weak, and that Aeschylus in his patriotic desire to exalt the Areopagus by attributing its foundation to so august an occasion has fallen into bathos. But after all, whether or not Aeschylus' manipulation of this development in the plot be due to patriotism, is it not also amply justified dramatically? The decision of a case so subtle and so momentous, if it is to be sympathetically accepted and regarded as valid, must not shock the moral sense of the audience. It must appear, not as an incomprehensible decree of the gods, accepted without being understood, but rather as a clarification of the spectator's own perplexity, and a revelation to him of his own real feeling and judgment in the matter. In referring the case to the Areopagus, Aeschylus is but referring it to his audience, and asking for their solution of the problem. And the tie in the Areopagus is a reflection of their inability to take sides and to break the deadlock.

It remains for Athena to cast the decisive vote, which she gives in favor of Orestes. But her reason for her action, like the arguments of Apollo and the Erinyes, seems at first sight irrelevant to the deeper moral aspects of the question. She favors Orestes rather than Clytemnestra because, born as she is, directly from the head of Zeus, she has had no mother. But here again we may ask whether her explanation of her course is as beside the point as it appears. The case has now

been carried to the court of final appeal, and has been tested by the divine wisdom and weighed in the flawless scales of absolute Justice. But the divine is no more able than the human tribunal to hand down a decision based upon moral grounds. The moral obligations exactly balance, and hence condemnation and acquittal are equally just. The reason then for the decision must be found in other than moral considerations.

We may also note the inversion of the original dilemma. The very situation which makes it morally obligatory on Orestes to choose between the alternatives presented makes it equally obligatory upon Athena to refrain from choosing. He by a refusal, she by a willingness, to take sides would be committed to the same morally indefensible partisanship. The one by suspending, the other by rendering judgment between the conflicting claims, would register a similar approval of unrighteousness and prove unfaithful to the Moral Law.

This *dénouement* has been attacked as weak. Aeschylus, it is said, gives up the problem in despair as insoluble, and the play ends in an anti-climax, or rather in suspense. But were this true, would not the final episode of the placation of the Erinyes and their transformation into the Eumenides be inexplicable? Would not its dramatic irrelevance to the play as a whole be beyond any possible justification by a patriotic and pious desire to celebrate the institution of the worship of the dread goddesses at Athens?

It is impossible, however, to believe that the transformation of the Erinyes into the Eumenides was not intended to be an integral part of the development of the plot. Aeschylus may be a patriot, but he is also a playwright. And the function of the episode, it seems to me, is clear enough. It serves precisely to indicate the solution of the problem which the poet has in mind. Doubtless he feels that the problem is in a sense insol-

uble, but the very solution lies, to speak paradoxically, in recognizing its insolubility. For after all, how shall Justice, human or divine, deal with a case where the conflicting obligations are equally imperative and equally balanced? Justice must suspend judgment, for it can give no decision without violating itself. To decide either for or against Orestes is equally to nullify the most solemn obligations of filial duty. The gods must take both sides and no side if they are not to contravene the very law of which they are the guardians. Justice, then, in a case where the agent has been the victim of equally balanced moral obligations, lies precisely in not judging. The defendant escapes, not through any positive movement of the moral machinery of the universe in his favour, but through the immobility consequent upon its having reached a dead centre.

This is the thought, it seems to me, which underlies the final episode of the transformation of the Erinyes into the Eumenides and makes it a vital part of the evolution of the drama. When the Erinyes, balked as they think of their legitimate prey, threaten to visit Athens with their wrath, Athena points out that they have not really lost their case, regarded even in its crudest aspect of blind and primitive blood-vengeance. The decision has not gone against them, for no decision as to the merits of the case has been given. Their demand for the punishment of the slayer of Clytemnestra has not been outweighed but merely counterbalanced by the right of the murdered Agamemnon to be avenged. Therefore their anger is without justification.

This, however, is but half of the story. Athena's plea might give perhaps sufficient reason for inducing the Erinyes to depart without molesting the city, but it does not account for their decision to stay and become beneficent tutelary goddesses. The underlying idea of the further argument by which Athena prevails upon them

to remain seems to be that their very failure to exact the penalty demanded of Orestes by the primitive and purely automatic law of blood-vengeance is really their triumph as servants of a higher Justice which takes motives and circumstances into its reckoning. Her invitation to them to become the Eumenides, partners in her task and in her honours, is an appeal to them to become the conscious and comprehending ministers of that Moral Order which hitherto they have descried but dimly and served only in part. Retaliation, to be just, must be allied to wisdom, must be actuated not by what is lowest and most barbarous, but by all that is noblest and most civilized in man.

If the Erinyes will become the Eumenides, if they will accept and serve this higher and civilized Justice which marks the reign of the new gods and is expressed in the acquittal of Orestes, then all will be well. They will be worthy of worship, and will be revered and honoured along with the Reason with which they have allied themselves. If not, they must go. But Athena's threat is veiled. It is by persuasion that the Erinyes are finally won. Justice cannot be established upon violence. The Right can reign, can only be right, if it is based not upon a forced but upon a freely given recognition and homage.

Such I take to be the solution offered by Aeschylus to the problem presented by a balance of conflicting duties. But is there not also a suggestion that this solution is secondary to a harder and deeper task—that of reconciling to the civilization of the poet's day, with its humane and splendid vision of both the nature of the gods and the destiny of man, the old order of barbarism and violence out of which that civilization had so lately arisen? The social conditions and the moral ideals reflected in a concept such as that of the Erinyes had been left behind. If the cult was to endure, it had to be brought

into accordance with the juster views and the nobler sentiments of modern times. Piety and patriotism alike imposed upon Aeschylus the task of transfiguring and ennobling it. This he accomplished by the idea of an evolution of the Erinyes into the Eumenides, which should focus, as it were, the development of primitive and barbaric into the civilized and enlightened Justice of which the final release of Orestes is an example.

The last point gains at least plausibility from its accord with a well-accredited interpretation of the significance of the Trilogy or Tetralogy, of which the *Prometheus Bound* alone is preserved to us. The problem there is to square the old, imperfectly moralized Zeus of the Homeric and Hesiodic canon and of the *Prometheus Bound* with the all-just and all-holy Zeus of the great choruses in the *Agamemnon* and the *Suppliant Maidens*. The key to the difficulty, it has been suggested, lies in the idea of an evolution of the character of Zeus. Aeschylus reconciles the old canonical story to the demands of a maturer ethics by representing Zeus as growing, just as man has grown, out of the old reign of violence and brute force into that conformity with the moral ideal in which the divinity of the gods alone consists, and upon which their sway over the hearts of men depends.

There may be then a deeper affinity between the *Eumenides* and the *Prometheus* than is patent at first sight. Both plays perhaps really express the same idea, are occupied with the same problem, and propose the same answer. But one is not warranted in presenting such a suggestion, nor for that matter perhaps this Paper as a whole, in more than a tentative and interrogatory spirit.